

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Chapter 33

Paul's Last Letter (2 Timothy) and Last Days

I suspect that I have some morbid personality trait. I think about death. I think about what it will be like to die. I think about what thoughts might go through my mind, and “how I want to go.”

I always assumed everyone thought about death as I did. I found out that may not be true. Years ago, I was probing the subject with a childhood friend of mine, and I asked him whether he thought about the same things. Kevin said, “No, of course not.” I was surprised. I said, “Surely you think about what it will be like to die.” Again he demurred saying, “No, that seems weird.” I then said, “Well, come on! Think about it! What do you think your last thoughts will be?” He was a bit irritated as he answered, “I don’t know! If I am going to die in a car wreck, my last thought will probably be, ‘STOP!!!!’” I stopped the conversation.

I remember a poll discussed on NPR radio years ago. A collection of doctors and nurses were asked how they would prefer to die. A clear majority of them actually chose cancer. I had thought they would choose to die in one’s sleep, or some other means that might catch one unaware.

The reason the doctors and nurses gave was their desire to be aware of when death was coming. With cancer, they reasoned, the doctors would be able to provide a degree of certainty about when and how the death would come. Cancer patient generally has some time in which they can put their house into order, time to say what needs to be said to their loved ones. This time meant so much to those polled, that they would endure a more painful death than might be available otherwise.

There is something about preparing for one’s death that draws out personal reflection. As people contemplate their own mortality, they frequently reminisce about old times, old friends, and their ancestry. They also project into the future, considering their family and friends, and what their needs may be.

Through my practice of law, I have learned that it is not uncommon for people to put personal messages into their wills. It is an effort to deliver lasting messages that seem important not only to the one dying, but also to the ones still living.

This reverberates in my mind as I write this lesson because I read in 2 Timothy, many thoughts and reflections indicating Paul understood his death was around the corner. I join many who think this was his last letter, and Paul was taking the time

to say the things that needed to be said. He was emphasizing the things he thought Timothy should hear and remember. He was, in a spiritual sense, delivering to Timothy what could well be his last words.

The Bible details much of Paul's life, perhaps more than any character in the Bible, other than Jesus. We know of his upbringing, his Greek life and his Jewish life. We read of his unique and powerful education and his fervent walk in strict Judaism. We follow his conversion, following his growth in faith, and unfolding the missionary fruits of that faith. We read his letters of joy and his letters of anguish. Through Acts, we follow his three missionary trips in some detail. We read of multiple imprisonments including one that sent Paul all the way to Rome as his case was appealed to Caesar. We read of Paul as the persecutor and the persecuted. Through his pastoral epistles, we understand his additional missionary efforts that some scholars label as a "fourth missionary trip."

This brings us to Paul's last letter. In this letter, we follow some of Paul's last thoughts, for Paul knew his end on earth was near. We can examine this letter and insert some church history as we conclude the portions of the New Testament that concern Paul.

PAUL'S LIFE AFTER THE ACTS NARRATIVE

As we look at Paul's situation when writing 2 Timothy, we are reminded of Paul's actions after the close of Acts. Acts left Paul in prison in Rome waiting his appeal to Caesar Nero. Paul fully expected a release and wrote folks to prepare to see him soon (for example Philemon was told to prepare a room for him). Biblical evidence suggests that around 62, consistent with church history, Paul was in fact released. By carefully reading the letters Paul wrote after his release (1 Timothy and Titus), we are able to construct a tentative itinerary Paul followed as he went through Crete, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece.

We have a good basis in history for believing that Paul's missionary zeal took him as far as Spain during this time. Clement, a leader of the church in Rome, wrote a letter to the Corinthian church about 30 years later (95 A.D.). In this letter, Clement references Paul's death and speaks of Paul "teaching righteousness throughout the whole world" and specifically reaching "the limits of the west" (1 Clement 5:1-7). Most scholars understand this as a reference to Spain. Paul had certainly indicated in Romans 15:24 and 28 a desire and intent to go to Spain.

At some point, which we suspect to be around 65 – 67, Paul was again arrested and imprisoned in Rome. Caesar Nero and the government's position on Christianity changed somewhat during the interim between Paul's imprisonments. On the night of July 18/19 in the year 64, a five-day fire broke out in Rome that destroyed 20

percent of Rome and severely damaged half of the city. We read in the historian Tacitus of not only the fire, but also of Nero's reaction.¹

Tacitus explained that the rumors around Rome were that Nero had henchmen set the fire in order to have the excuse for rebuilding Rome to suit his personal taste. In an effort to squelch these rumors, Nero "substituted as culprits" Christians. Tacitus said,

But all human efforts...did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was the result of an order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

Another historian of Rome named Suetonius doesn't provide information linking the persecution to the fire, but he does specify that, "punishment was inflicted by Nero on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition."²

So, it was a different Rome with a different attitude when Paul was arrested again and wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy. The first Roman imprisonment we have studied from Acts was one where Paul was under house arrest. Paul was free to preach, receive visitors, and converse freely about his faith, even converting some of Caesar's guards. Furthermore, the basis for Paul's first imprisonment was trumped up on charges that would have seemed silly to Emperor Nero. By the second imprisonment, however, Christians were singled out for the most atrocious persecution and deaths merely because of their faith. They were the emperor's scapegoats and the imprisonment would be a far cry different. We will read in 2

¹ Tacitus was born around 56 A.D. and wrote his *Annals* of Roman history around 100 A.D. Chapter 15 contains his account of the fire.

² Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, 16:2.

Timothy that, unlike his earlier imprisonment writings, Paul held no pretense or belief that he would get released. Paul knew his end was near.

Many passages show Paul's thoughts in this regard. Paul wrote of "the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus" in 1:1. In 1:10 he contrasted the "life and immortality" Christ brought to the "death" Christ abolished. In 2:11 he references that "if we have died with him, we will also live with him." Paul makes multiple references to those who had already passed on, both his relatives (1:3) and Timothy's (1:5). Paul wrote of the coming day of Christ's return and judgment ("I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me" 1:12; "Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead" 4:1; "the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day" 4:6-8; and "The Lord will ... bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom" 4:18).

With this in mind, we consider the letter in overview.

2 TIMOTHY

Paul identified himself at the start of the letter in his typical fashion as "an apostle of Christ Jesus," but in the face of his death, he added an additional phrase, "according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus." We will see clearly in this letter that Paul was in earthly misery, staring a gruesome death in the face. Because of his faith, Paul saw death not as an end, but as a beginning, a transformation into a glorious life.

Paul wrote to Timothy as his "dear son," and we are remiss if we do not pause and remember that Timothy and Paul were companions for much of Paul's ministry. Paul converted Timothy in Asia Minor and took Timothy on countless adventures spreading the gospel. Timothy was the reliable one Paul would leave behind to help churches as Paul pressed on. Timothy had a weak stomach and a somewhat timid disposition. He was younger than Paul and Paul felt strong fatherly love for him.

So, Paul declared God's "grace, mercy and peace" to Timothy. Paul did so thanking God for Timothy "night and day" in prayer. Paul recalled Timothy's "tears," and Paul longed to see him again. Thinking of Timothy's faith that came through his mother and grandmother (Timothy's earthly father was pagan while his maternal relatives were Jewish Christians), Paul urged Timothy to "fan into flame" the gift of God that Timothy possessed.

Paul reminded Timothy that God did not give him "a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (1:7). We must be touched as we read this

knowing Paul wrote what he considered might be his last earthly words to this dear son of his. Paul hoped that he might get to see Timothy again before his death, but there was no guarantee. So Paul wrote the things he believed Timothy needed to hear from one last teaching of his father in the faith.

Paul told Timothy never to be ashamed over the gospel or over Paul. Instead, Timothy should join Paul in suffering for the gospel if need be. God never called us just to die. God has called us to life. God “destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (1:10). Paul saw the death of Christ as one that destroyed death for believers. Immortality awaited Paul, Timothy, and others in Christ. Hence, even in his suffering and miserable condition, Paul bore no shame or embarrassment.

Paul was not ashamed of his arrest and its concurrent suffering. He had no shame because of the reason he suffered. He suffered because of his faith in Christ Jesus. That very faith that brought the suffering is a faith that brought confidence in the face of suffering. For,

“I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day” (1:12).

Paul did not write, “I know *what* I have believed.” Paul’s salvation did not lie in some doctrine or belief system. Paul’s confidence was centered in a person -- in Jesus Christ. Paul’s trust in Christ was the center of his thought and encouragement in the face of death. Paul’s assurance of Christ prompted him not only to see his own death with resolution and confidence, but also to advise Timothy to live consistent with that faith.

Paul wanted Timothy to follow the pattern of Paul’s life, keeping Paul’s teaching “with faith and love in Christ Jesus.” Paul urged Timothy to “guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you.” Even this, though, was not done alone, but with the “help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us” (1:13).

Not every one lived with this confidence and faith. In fact, Paul pointed out to Timothy that in the midst of his suffering and imprisonment, “everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes” (1:15). No doubt the temptation would be strong to distance oneself from Paul and the faith when in Rome where Nero used Christians as human torches to light his gardens at night. But not all did! Paul singled out Onesiphorous as an example to Timothy. Paul told Timothy that Onesiphorous sought Paul out in Rome, searching “hard until he found me.” Onesiphorous did not hide from Paul in shame, but ministered to him “refreshing” Paul in his chains (1:16-18).

Paul's encouragement to Timothy in the face of his death was to "stay strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2:1). Paul emphasized the continuity of his teaching, urging Timothy to entrust Paul's teachings to other "reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others."

Paul used analogies to encourage Timothy in his walk. Paul urged Timothy to endure hardships pleasing Christ as a soldier endures in an effort to please his commander. Just as an athlete competes according to the rules in order to win, Timothy was to do right. Timothy could get joy from such a life as he watched the fruit of his labor, just as a farmer got the joy of the first share of his own crops.

Paul reinforced his gospel message with Timothy by reminding him of the implications of Christ's death for which Paul was willing to suffer and die. While Paul was in chains, no chains could ever restrict the message of God. If we were with Christ in his death on Calvary, we will live with him eternally. As we endure, we reign victorious over death as well. Disowning Christ is not an option. "If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2:11-13). Paul knew that Christ remains faithful to us. There was no reason for Paul to turn from his faith even in the presence of death.

So, Timothy was urged to teach this to others. Timothy was to do his best to present himself "to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2:15). To Paul, actions made a difference. True words encourage and exhort people; deceptive words lead folks astray. Timothy was to work on God's foundation. It is solid, and God knows those who are his.

Accordingly, Timothy was told to live as a noble instrument in God's house, useful and ready to do any good work for the Father. Timothy was to flee "the evil desires of youth," opting instead to pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace. Timothy was to avoid foolish and stupid arguments that produce quarrels and disharmony. Instead, Timothy was to be kind to everyone with gentle instruction to those who oppose him to help even his enemies come to their senses (2:22-26).

Paul noted that in the "last days," times would be terrible. ("Last days" referenced the times after the ascension of Christ until his second coming. In other words, Paul lived in the "last days" as do we today.) People will have a form of godliness but will deny its power. These people are

lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers

of God” (3:1-5).

Why are these folks having a form of godliness but denying its power? Because it is the power of God that transforms us from our fallen sinful nature into something much grander, he transforms us into an image of his Son. That power at work in us sets us apart (makes us “holy”) from the world and Satan’s power.

Paul explained that those who follow this course in denial of God are depraved and, regardless of what they say, are not people of faith. Rather, they are people “who, as far as faith is concerned, are rejected” (3:8).

Timothy saw the difference simply by observing Paul. Even when Paul was persecuted (which happens in some form to all who want to live a godly life in Christ), his way of life was one of purpose, faith, patience, and love. Paul reinforced that Timothy was to walk as Paul. Timothy’s mother and grandmother taught him the Old Testament as a child. These scriptures are “God-breathed.” They are “from God” (see call out box). They are “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (3:16).

Paul closed his words to Timothy, speaking what could well be the last words to this entrusted son, with a charge. Solemnly, in the presence of God and Christ, Paul charged Timothy to “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful

instruction” (4:1-2). Paul knew the proclivity of people to gather around teachers who say what the audience wants to hear instead of what is true. Timothy was told to “keep your head in all situations,” faithfully performing his work as a minister.

“God-breathed”

Paul uses a term that combines the Greek word for “God” (*theos* - θεος) with the Greek word for “breathed” (*pneō* - πνέω). It is the only time we find the word in the New Testament or in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the “Septuagint”). Yet the word was not made up by Paul. We can find it used several times in a group of writings called the “Pseudepigrapha.” These books range in date from 3 centuries before the New Testament to three centuries afterwards. Some passages even vary in date within the same book.

In the fifth chapter of the Sibylline Oracle (generally deemed one of the older chapters written in Alexandria before the time of the New Testament) we see the word used twice. Each time it references God as a source, once of certain streams (5.308) and once as the source of all people (5.406).

In the Apocalypse of Abraham, likely written around 70AD, after Abraham’s death, the angels used “divine” or “God-breathed” ointments in preparing him for his resurrected life in the presence of God (20.11).

Paul explained that the time had indeed come for Paul to depart. Paul was set to die as a martyr for Christ, to be “poured out like a drink offering” (4:6). Paul did not fear his death. Paul knew he had “fought the good fight...finished the race...kept the faith.” Paul knew that God had a crown of righteousness awaiting Paul, just as he does for all who abide in Christ (4:8).

Paul did urge Timothy to try and get to Rome to see him “quickly.” Paul had only Luke with him. If Timothy could get to Paul soon, then Paul wanted Timothy to bring Paul’s cloak and his scrolls. Paul closed affirming to Timothy that, come what may, Paul was rescued by God and would safely be delivered to God’s kingdom.

Paul ended by sending greetings to other loved ones. Paul again urged Timothy to try and reach him before winter. We then hear our last words from Paul as he tells Timothy, “The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you” (4:22).

POSTSCRIPT

What happened to Paul? Scripture does not tell us, but we have a good bit of reliable church history that tells of his death. Writing in 96, Clement of Rome references Paul as one of the men of “holy life” who was persecuted and died during the reign of Nero.³ This is borne out by several other post-New Testament writers, including Origen (mid 240’s) and Eusebius (300’s).⁴

While history is solid on Paul’s martyrdom in Rome, there is a bit less certainty on where he was executed. The Roman pastor Gaius wrote a little over a hundred years later that Paul and Peter were both executed on the *Ostian Way* at a location that was marked by monuments. Some believe that this location was merely Paul’s burial location, not his actual execution site.

Also written a hundred years after his death was an early church work called *The Acts of Paul*.⁵ Some of the history in this work is clearly embellished. Most

³ 1 Clement 6:1 is interpreted by most every scholar to refer to the persecutions under Nero.

⁴ Eusebius was the first after Luke to diligently research and write a history of the church. His Ecclesiastical History (3:1) referenced Paul’s death. (“Paul, spreading the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum and finally suffering martyrdom at Rome under Nero.”) Eusebius was an exhaustive researcher who wrote a fairly reliable history.

⁵ According to the early church writer Tertullian, an elder in a church in Turkey wrote the “history” in honor of Paul, but lost his office once his work was determined unauthentic. This work, dated around 160AD recorded that Paul was brought before Nero when the Christians were being killed in masse. Nero noted that the other Christian prisoners treated Paul deferentially; so Nero determined that Paul was a leader among them. Nero ordered Paul beheaded. The Acts of Paul reports, “Then Paul stood with his face to the east and lifted up his hands unto heaven and prayed

scholars, however, accept the accuracy of the account of Paul's death by beheading as contained in the book.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"The time of my departure has come"* (4:6).

Absent meeting the Lord in the air, we will all die. That is a certainty. I cannot tell you when, I cannot tell you how, but I can tell you it is so. There may or may not be time to prepare knowing your time is at hand. But there is time to prepare right now. Think for a moment about the things that matter. Think about the things you want said and the things you want done. Live understanding that an end will come, and be ready.

2. *"I know whom I have believed"* (1:12).

The very first thing everyone should do in preparation for death is to put his or her faith in Christ. To go to the grave without embracing the gospel is simply foolish. Jesus Christ is the way to God; no one goes to God through any other point of connection.

3. *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith"* (4:7).

There is, in all likelihood, a gap between now and the day we will stand before God in judgment. During that gap, we have a race to run, a fight to win, a faith to keep. Let us commit together that we will follow our Lord in our lives, just as we will follow him in eternity.

a long time, and in his prayer he conversed in the Hebrew tongue with the fathers, and then stretched forth his neck without speaking." The Acts then records that the executioner "struck off his head." *Acts of Paul* X.V (Oxford 1924) trans. M. R. James.